MINDSTORM MAGAZINE

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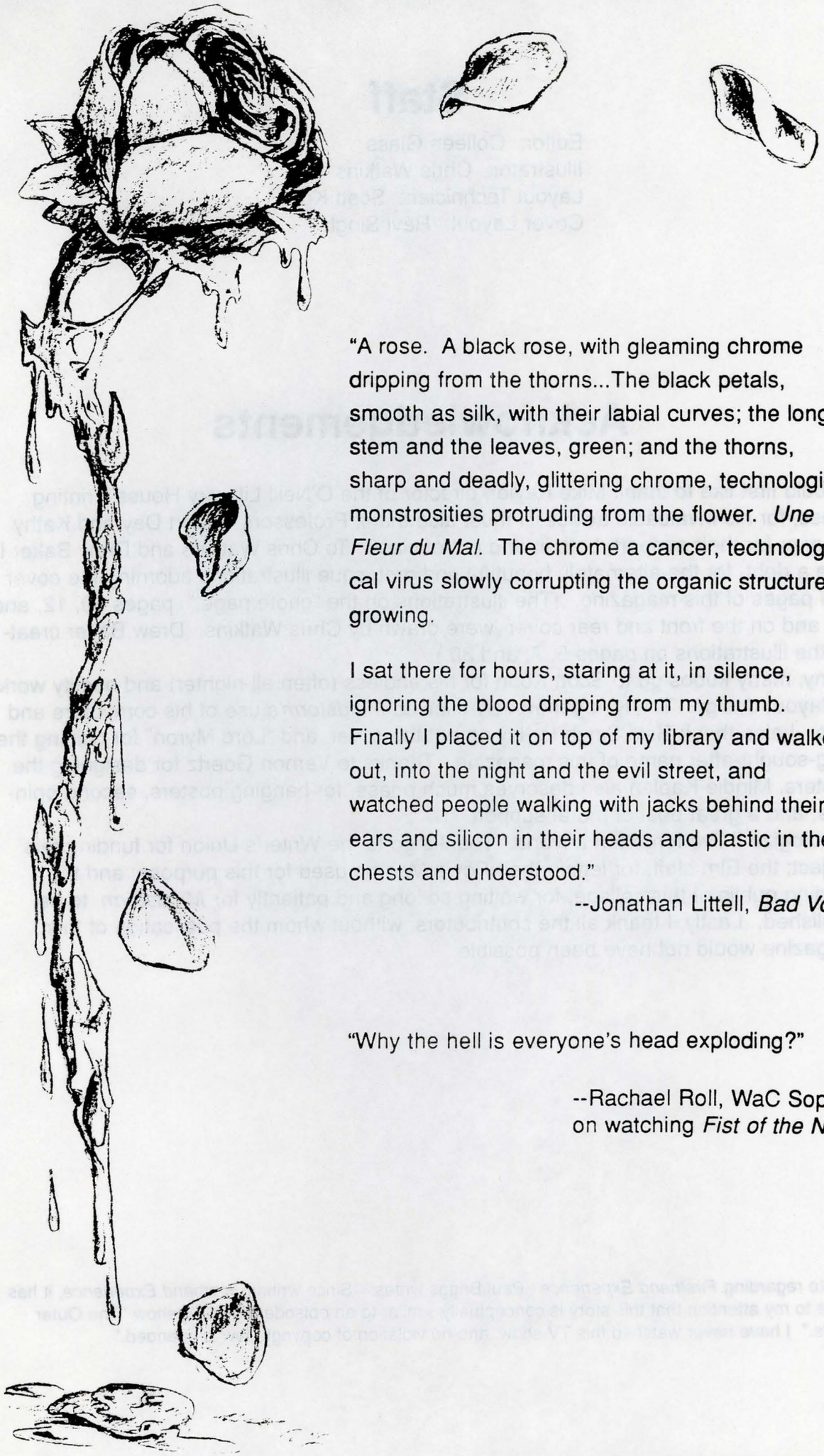
A note regarding *Firsthand Experience*. Paul Briggs writes: "Since writing *Firsthand Experience*, it has come to my attention that this story is conceptually similar to an episode of the TV show "The Outer Limits." I have never watched this TV show, and no violation of copyright law is intended."



"A rose. A black rose, with gleaming chrome dripping from the thorns...The black petals, smooth as silk, with their labial curves; the long stem and the leaves, green; and the thorns, sharp and deadly, glittering chrome, technological monstrosities protruding from the flower. *Une Fleur du Mal.* The chrome a cancer, technological virus slowly corrupting the organic structure, growing.

I sat there for hours, staring at it, in silence, ignoring the blood dripping from my thumb. Finally I placed it on top of my library and walked out, into the night and the evil street, and watched people walking with jacks behind their ears and silicon in their heads and plastic in their chests and understood."

--Jonathan Littell, *Bad Voltage*

"Why the hell is everyone's head exploding?"

--Rachael Roll, WaC Sophomore,
on watching *Fist of the North Sta*

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And the Fire Laughed...

by Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

And the fire laughed as the world burned.

Peter woke, his dream still alive in his head. Twisting, it bore through to his spine, where it danced up and down, making him shiver. Where had these dreams come from? The strange ones that made perfect sense, then turned crazy upon his awakening? Lying back down, he pulled the covers around him and stared at the ceiling.

The Knowing - The Knowing - The Knowing! A hum sounded around the world, starting in Peter's bedroom and circling. The water trilled it, wet and new to the Earth, who whispered it, dark and damp, when it reached the Air, who hissed it shrill and hot when it mixed with Fire. But it was not *the Knowing. The man had awakened.*

Peter rose, finally, and got ready to work. While dressing, he reflected on the strange dreams. They had been coming for about a year now, swift and hot. He did not understand them. Shrugging, Peter sat down and prepared to write. Lately, he had been having trouble producing his usual five pages a day. He was working on a novel of the Civil War, but the words weren't coming. They just weren't bursting into his head like before.

Back from his unproductive night of Calling, Erif clenched his fist, the fingernails piercing his palm. How stupid, how utterly moronic these humans were. For one thing, they were restricted to one shape. They could not change as he could, they'd never know the freedom of being elemental, or the joy of superintelligence. Semi-intelligent creatures, they were stuck in the purgatory of existence.

Later that day, Peter joined his best friend Mark at the tennis club for an afternoon game. Midway through the first set, thwack-CRACKLE, the fire leapt up, burning through Peter's brain, smoke-smell filling his nose, his face combusting into flaming skin. He stood there, transfixed, staring at the hard green surface, while Mark prodded, "Peter, Peter, Earth to Peter, what's *wrong* with you?"

Peter missed the return, and missed the message.

Stamping his feet, Erif moaned. Why was this human not listening*? He couldn't even get through with initial communication, and without that, Peter-human would* never *hear the Message. The Link, the idea that would preserve and enrich writing forever, depended on Peter. A terrifying thought! In desperation, Erif decided to try once again to reach Peter. He condensed himself, feeling his solid form melt in the face of his elemental state. Fire leapt, and he burned through Peter's mind.*

Peter sat up from the examination table, pulling his shirt back over his head. "Well, your breathing is normal, you don't have a fever. Peter, Peter, what's wrong?" Peter did not answer, he was blinking crazily against invisible light, and flinching from

imaginary heat. "Peter, we can run some more extensive tests if you'd like, but there's no guarantee we'll find anything. Perhaps you'd like to look into psychiatric help." Finally, the fire burnt to ashes, allowing Peter to plead, "I'm not crazy, Doc, I'm not crazy...am I?" Suddenly he wasn't sure anymore. What was *wrong* with him, what had been happening these past months?

Erif calculated in his head. One year past, almost. He was running out of time. After a year, he would have to concede. The Void would win, Knowledge lose. Void be damned, he hated when that happened! Enlightenment must *triumph over chaos. When links are lost, ignorance reigns and crucial Knowledge is never released into the world. Why, look at Salieri, whom Ria had lost, or Ghirlandaio, the failure of Htrae.*

Peter sat in front of his computer once again, forehead furrowed. Where had his Muse gone? She had disappeared, killed by the fire that incinerated his mind. At first, it had only been when he was writing, then it came in his dreams, and now, as it neared a year of flames, it came whenever it pleased. Maybe he *was* crazy. And yet, and yet, there was almost something in the fire, something fleeting, but something mesmerizing. He had no time for mesmerization now, however; he had work to do, a deadline.

His muse had gone away? What did he think Erif had been doing for the past year, taking a vacation? And why must a muse always be a she*?! Of the four, only Ria was female, and she always ended up with all the credit. He hated to admit this, but maybe it was time for reinforcements. Peter had almost listened, but that just wasn't good enough. The Knowledge had to be released, to save the art of writing. No writing would ever be the same, after the Knowing.*

Holding his face, trying to think, Peter felt the heat. No fever, HAH! He felt the floor tilt under his chair, and wind stirred the papers on his desk. The sound of rushing water filled his ears. "I'm not crazy, I'm not crazy, I'm not crazy," was his litany as he covered his ears. He took a deep breath, lifted his head, and repeated "I will write, I will write, I need to write, I will write, I will write," as he punched the keyboard in frustration. "Begone, Demons!" Peter shouted as he furiously deleted the pounded letters, without reading the message written there.

In the beginning, there had been only the elements: Earth and Air, Fire and Water. They were created by the All-Knowing. Then came the darkness, the Void whose ignorance dimmed the world. The All-Knowing gave the elements the Knowledge to guard against the Void. Life is an endless battle between the two, and someday the Knowmes will win.

The sun sank soft and flaming over the lake that evening. Peter didn't notice. He was stretched out in his reclining chair on his lake-dipping deck, peering intently at a brown notebook. Earth, Water, Air, and Fire danced around him as he scribbled. Finally, Peter looked up, lifted the notebook over his head, and threw it in a high arc into the lake. The Knowmes watched him, and despaired.

Into the Light

by Mindie Kaplan

Today.

The word was passed around the Caverns in hurried, whispered comments, as we watched furtively so that no Older would catch us in our transgression. A few were excited. More were scared. The List had been read; those Chosen for the Ceremony were dazed. Wondering how to react, I was one of the chosen listed, and could see my shocked numbness reflected in their eyes. We weren't sure whether to be happy or frightened or just emotionlessly accepting of our fate.

The Ceremony was Special we knew. Although that was all the knowledge we were entitled to. Why would one tell a Littleone about an Older's rite? There is so much that was unknown to us, not proper for a Littleone to know. Still we were curious. Too well taught to speak further now that we knew our fates, although the spoken word was the most frequent transgression among us, we kept our thoughts silently to ourselves. The only right of the Littleone was to right obey. The Chosen, I knew, should be obedient even more so than the rest of the children. Silently, we watched the apprehension growing around us. The tension was apparent in their taught faces and the stiffness of the gestures that we used for communication. But the Waketime went on as always: prayers, school, meals, work, prayer, meals, then school in the usual endless cycle. The dark stone rooms were silent except for the unavoidable sounds of Industry; proper Littleones do not speak except for necessary things, preferring instead total immersion in one's own thoughts and prayer.

I could feel the improper stares of the others as I worked. I used to stare at those picked for the rites myself, when I still belonged to the group of Littleones. The God-touched were always fascinating to watch, I thought. Was I any different in their eyes now?

I was anxious, like the others, and I gulped the evening meal quickly, as if that act would hurry the plodding of Time. Although the Ceremony was a secret there were always the fleeting comments, bits of forbidden fruit floating between the spaces, so I listened eagerly like everyone else. It was the only way to learn anything except the dogma that the Leader ordained we know. The Laws, they were called. It was a joke really, I realized later, propaganda fed to keep us quiet and obedient; to the children it was the Divine Truth. It was the reason I was there eating my final meal and Waiting.

Everyone appeared by the Pool after last meals. Last Meals were always a quiet affair; there was nothing that was necessary to say, so all speech was forbidden. Noise of any kind was suspicious. Any sound could cover whispered speech.

The Order Keepers were always near to keep the children from sin. It was blasphemous to use the Spoken Word except to command and worship, except we still whispered in the dark of Sleeptime and when the Olders were not watching. That was how I learned the other word for the Chosen, the word the Olders used when they referred to us among themselves, the "Rejects."

Everyone scooped up their food eagerly as they ate, gulping it down and not really minding that one food tasted no different from another. Like always. Clanking dishes made some small noise that filled the silence of our lives. Not too much, never too much, lest we bring on the notice of one of the Order Keepers. Attention was unwanted. Evil. To be different was wrong. But I always enjoyed Last Meals. Meals made you feel alive again. What a joke. Soon the Chosen would all be dead. They told us it was special, a blessing; we would meet our God. Even then, I understood that I was to die.

Something within me wanted to live, but at the same time I wanted to see what a god looked like and what kind of things populated His world. I was confused more than anything else, torn between anticipation and dread. With the patterned motion we had spent all our lives practicing, the Littleones rose as one from the great Meal tables.

The Pool was a huge cavern in the Center. The Center was in the middle of the huge complex of caves where we all lived and worked, next to the Mine. Huge, irregular-shaped steps, sometimes too large for my feet, led down into darkness. I couldn't see the water; although I knew it was there—another forbidden tidbit of knowledge. I was jostled and shoved as they pushed us deeper into the cavern. It was too dark to see the other Littleone's gestures of apology, but I knew they had no choice in pushing me. I was as impolite to the others around me; my gestures grew frantic as I attempted to apologize to each one. We were just too many for this corridor, the largest I had ever seen. I forgave them in the darkness with quick signals and hoped that they would forgive me just out of habit really, not that it made a difference. But even with all of us, there was only the noise of shuffling feet and the dripping of water into the Pool.

The water was felt more than heard. It was Thought-Faith become real, deep inside the cave. It seemed as if there were hundreds of us stuffed into the edges of cavern around the water. Most of us were children, like me. There were, of course, some exceptions among us, a few Olders: some of them were failed Mothers. Some had hidden when the call came to the Pool, some—the boys—were too weak to work the mines. This I instinctively knew, although I could only dimly see the thin shapes moving around me. There was more light farther ahead, in what I supposed to be the Wonderous Center, and sometimes I could see an individual face. I tried to see someone I could recognize, but there were just too many.

One girl, an Older, stood by me. She gestured to the many block pillars near the

top of the steps and the shadowy figures of pillars farther down as the steps led from the ledge into the Pool. We stood on the edge of the ledge. The passage leading away from this place would have almost been within my reach, but we were packed much too tightly for me to bolt away from the group. There were Words were on the pillars

and I knew that was what the Older was pointing to. "This!" she shouted with a fanatical voice. "This is what we were born to do!" Her words echoed loudly in the quiet cave. They were instantly forgiven because they were Worship. But it was all just a nicety now; the Leader could not have picked the Older out of our crowd. As babies we had the Lesson pounded into us that the Leader could do whatever she wanted and didn't have to obey the natural laws we did, so maybe she could have plucked the offending mouth out from the press of bodies, but there was little point to it. We were all going to die anyway. It was an Honor to die for the Faith, we were told, but it was still death, still that lowering into eternal blackness and nothingness. The god lived in darkness, they said, and solitude. We, the children of the caverns, had always known the touch of torchlight, the press of live bodies near ours from the moment of our birth. And I was afraid, although the Words tried to comfort me. I was born to give my life to God; that was my purpose. The Words became a litany, became...meaningless.

"You want to do this?" I whispered, a little less afraid now that I had Spoken and touched another's Spirit. The sounds of my voice were lost in the magnitude of the restless bodies around us. Small children who were seldom idle could hardly hold still although the useless sound-making movements were sinful. Sins could be expected among us since only the Unfit were ever sent to the Pools. There were too many children now, we filled the caverns until there was no space left; that was why so many of us were here.

"This is what we do. Let me lead the way into the Pool," she told me, pointing to

the right of the centermost pillar, the pillar directly in front of us.

"Hold my hand." I whispered, begging her. "Please, when we jump." I was afraid again. "I can't go alone," I began to cry soundlessly. To sob was unthinkable, or maybe not. I was speaking, pleading, and that was not how a good Littleone behaved.

"Yes, of course," she whispered.

But it wasn't just "of course." We had no right to expect anything from another, certainly not from one mad Older that I had never seen before.

"Just walk the steps with me. This is what the Blessed were born to do," she parroted the Law effortlessly. Everything was Planned. If you were born for the Ceremony, to fulfill your existence in sacrifice, then this was what you must do.

I clung to her, like I had seen others cling to their Mothers. I never had a Mother, so this one— this Older that I had never seen before— she was to be my Mother now. and would help me go to my destiny with honor. I looked up at her, standing in the shadow of torchlight, tall and eager. Her eyes scanned the darkness past the first Pillar as if she could see beyond it. The Leader began to intone the Final Prayer and we obediently chanted with her. A child, a Tenold, somewhere to the left of us screamed and jumped. The chant was broken. Horror filled the air, as we listened to the huge splash and the thrashing, and then the inhuman screams as God punished the disobedient. The water began to bubble. I shrank back against the Older, utterly terrified, still clinging. "Join him now," the Leader told us contemptuously. She hadn't ended the prayer. Panic raced against the walls of the Cavern, igniting our fears. The Purpose had been broken.We would be the ones to pay for the Tenold's crime; we went now without the Blessing and we would go down to the Place of Torment instead of the Blessed Blackness. Only the Blessing would conduct us to the Good Place. I trembled and cried.

We walked down with the group, down the steps the Older had gestured towards. We were all afraid, but we are taught to ignore emotions and our training led us down to our deaths. Even the smallest couldn't break conditioning. We all jumped together in one mass of arms and legs.

It seemed like we fell an eternity before we hit the water. We screamed then, and were surprised at the volume our cries produced, like the paralyzing shrieks of an animal. I hurt so much; the water had felt like a wall. Water was always so soft when you drank it. who would have though it would hurt so much? The screaming continued as God came for us with dozens of Demons, each bearing sharp, cutting teeth. Even the smallest Littleones knew to fear the unnatural hunger of Demons and the power of a god who could make soft, blessed water hard.

If only we had received the Blessing...I was sure this was a part of my punishment. Without warning, I was pulled under by the crazed thrashings around me. I surfaced, somehow, and spewed foul tasting water out of my mouth. Keep moving, some-

thing told me, until the Creatures come. This madness had to end soon. Why hadn't they come for me yet?

Eventually. the screams quieted down. All I could hear was an occasional cry for help and the pulling of arms. I screamed in fear as I felt something, then laughed hysterically as I realized it was the rock of the Pool's ledge. It was over. Finally, I had made it to the end. I dragged myself out of the water and lay there, exhausted. There was no one around me, no sound, nothing to see but cold, damp rock; I started to cry. I cried myself into sleep, the echoes of the screams resounding in my mind. The Older had died without the Blessing as had the others. And me. Was I dead now too?

I woke up, screaming, and the Older had her arms around me, and comforted me. "What?" I whispered stupidly, not comprehending.

"I'm here," she answered, holding me. "It's all right."

I didn't think, then. of how we were alone, or wonder how we would find the way out. If someone had told me, I wouldn't have believed that such a thing as the Outside really existed. I had never thought of what was out there, in the light.

Firsthand Experience

by Paul Briggs

"In most cases," said Dr. Beauregard, "I'd say your request is not entirely unreasonable. But... well..."

"I've been studying this disorder for over three years now, and I haven't seen a single patient. Not even a cadaver. Think about it—does that make sense? I understand your objections, but I really need some firsthand experience if I'm going to get anywhere."

Dr. Elena Beauregard considered the intern. He was twenty-four, still young enough to be a thrill-seeker. She had seen more than a few thrill-seekers make their way into the compound by some subterfuge or other. Sometimes they ran out, screaming, horrified, knocking over furniture and shoving personnel aside in a frenzy to escape. More often they simply left, silent, hands shaking, faces white as death. Fainting, vomiting—you name it, she'd seen it. It always gave her a certain degree of illicit satisfaction, even though she knew how it hurt the victims of the disorder.

Young Jacob Stone, however, appeared more serious. After all, he had, as he said, been studying the disorder at the Cyrenaica Medical School on Eastcont for over three years. Surely he would not have spent so much time just so he could tell his buddies he'd gotten a firsthand look at a terato?

Jake, meanwhile, was terribly nervous. He'd had the question asked of him over and over, by so many different people—*Are you doing this out of sincere scientific interest? Or are you just looking for excitement?* He had done his best to remain adamant that he was honestly interested in teratomorphism, but he'd found that when people question you often enough, after a while you start questioning yourself. Instead of assuaging their doubts, you begin to internalize them. *What are my motives in this?* he wondered.

"Why should we treat this an differently from an other disorder?" he asked.

"Because it is different. You know it is. They aren't disabled physically in any way, and as far as we can tell, their intelligence is well above average. Only their appearance..."

"My psychology professor told me that revulsion is the easiest negative emotion to overcome. I know he never saw a teratomorph, but..."

"You're right. He didn't. This is not something you can simply get used to. I've been working with them for years, and I'm not used to it."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

"You don't even know what a chance you're taking. Once you've seen a terato-

morph, it stays with you for life." She touched his hand. "Some of our staff have committed suicide, Jacob. Most of the women who give birth to these babies eventually commit suicide."

"I'm not the suicidal type."

"Surely you must have heard rumors about what they looked like."

"Nothing reliable. There aren't even any rough sketches in the medical textbooks. I've been studying the gene sequences, the fetal development, everything, but I don't know what I'm looking at or how it corresponds to reality. I studied with Dr. Palmer at the Farsouthcont facility this spring, but he didn't tell me or show me anything."

"You studied with Dr. Robert Palmer?" asked Dr. Beauregard, impressed. It was Dr. Palmer who, twelve years ago, had put forth the theory that the teratomorphs were a byproduct of the alteration process by which the first human settlers on Ophir adapted themselves genetically to the environment. This was currently the most widely accepted explanation of the disorder. Unfortunately, virtually no information on those settlers or the process had survived the first few centuries. As a result, there was no way of knowing for sure. Nonetheless, Dr. Palmer was generally regarded as the foremost geneticist of Ophir. If this Jacob Stone had studied with him, there must be something to him.

After a long pause, she said, "Are you sure—completely sure—that you want to go through with this?"

"Doctor," said Jake, "I need firsthand experience."

Dr. Beauregard said nothing. She sat back in her chair, took a deep breath, and pulled off her mask.

Jake looked around the dying Fourth Street pub. There were only a half dozen other people in Oscar's, all over fifty. Nobody looked interesting. No plain human face could erase the image that had burned itself onto his retinas.

I had every chance in the world to back down, he said to himself. *I had more warnings than I can remember. I asked for this.*

Oscar returned from the basement with a bottle of New Hibernia maple rum. He didn't even bother blowing the dust off the bottle before opening it and pouring fifty milliliters of thick black fluid into Jake's glass.

"That's it?" asked Jake. "I asked for—"

"Nobody ever drinks this stuff straight," said Oscar. "Not after it's aged three hundred years. Three parts water to one part rum is as much as it's safe to drink. Probably more." He put the glass under the tap and ran the water until it filled to the

200-mil mark.

"Thank you," said Jake. Even cut, the liquor was black and opaque. He took a small swallow of it. It tasted good even as it burned his mouth and throat.

"I can remember other guys who came in saying they'd seen a terato," said the bartender. "Never bothered with descriptions, though. Just said, "Don't ask." I don't suppose you're ready with the details."

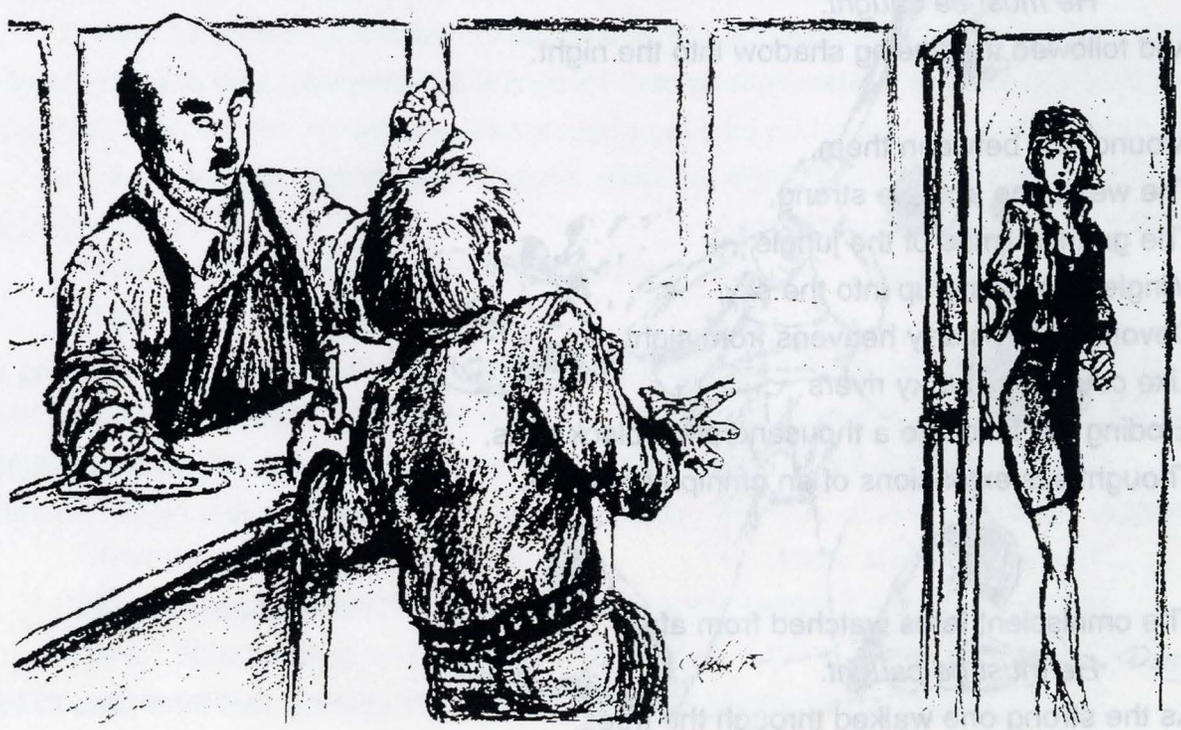
Jake shook his head. "No words for it," he said. Just then heads turned among the few patrons as a young woman walked into Oscar's.

"Now there's something more worth looking at," said Oscar. "A lot closer to your age than mine, though. Why not go see if she's available?"

Jake said nothing. He looked her over. She was beautiful, but her beauty only seemed to remind him the more of the horror he had seen. Her jauntily uneven face called to mind the unreal symmetricality of Dr. Beauregard's face. The woman's perfect nose, pointing straight up her forehead, reminded him of the teratomorph's nose, pointing straight down toward her mouth. (Hadn't there been something strange about the shape of her nose all along, even under the mask?)

Jake took another swallow, but the image only grew stronger. The skin, bereft of scales or crenulations, creating an illusion of flayed skinlessness. The impossible neck, with not a vein visible, unlike the delicate pattern of pulsing blood vessels that graced the young lady's throat. But the true horror had come when she spoke. Everything in her face—cheeks, eyebrows, lips—*moved*, came alive, as if there were *things* crawling around underneath. Things that could never bear the light of Zeta Herculis.

Jake finished the rum, paid, and went home.



Escape from the Heart of Darkness

(Based on a section of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness)

by Ryan Mc Allister

Cold, reptilian eyes glanced furtively about,
Escape...Escape...
A weak body lifted itself up on all fours
To the jungle...The jungle...
And dragged itself laboriously past the grassy edge
To my people...MY people...
Surrounding the encampment of the "civilized" men,
My people...My ivory...
Becoming but a shadow within an omnivorous darkness.

More distant eyes opened, awareness dawned.
He is gone.
Squinting into the darkness, they found the path
He cannot walk.
The limp form had made dragging itself through the grass.
What he will do to the Natives!
A tall, strong body rose on two legs
He must be caught.
And followed the fleeing shadow into the night.

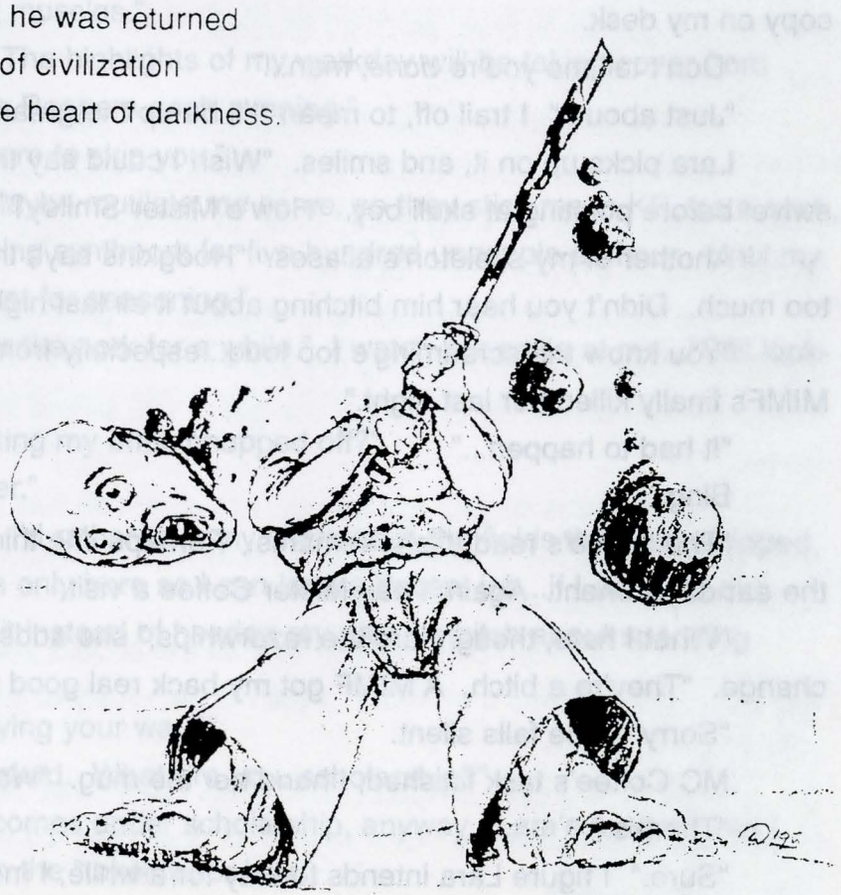
Around and between them,
The weak one and the strong,
The gnarled limbs of the jungle
Mingled, reaching up into the sky,
Devouring the starry heavens from sight
Like countless murky rivers
Eroding the land into a thousand pitch-black seas,
Thoughtless extensions of an omnipotent force.

The omniscient fates watched from afar
He must be caught.
As the strong one walked through the trees.

What he has caused;
He stopped, listening to the silence of the night
What he will cause,
And broke from the path the pursued had made,
Should he escape.
Immersing himself in the pitch-black sea.

The shadow rose on unsteady limbs
HIM!
As he knew of his pursuer.
-"Go Away,"
A mournful wail came
"Leave me alone;"
From within the corpse-like being
"I had such plans...such plans!"
As his future dissolved into pallid mist
Before his lonely eyes.

In the distance, the steady beating of drums
Began, asserting the iron bond of the wilderness
With its stricken prisoner as he was returned
To the small encroachment of civilization
That dared to exist within the heart of darkness.



Reinforcement

by Colleen Glass

The knock at my door turns out to be Lara from 9C. She's about 5'5", with a top-heavy figure and ponytailed hair between brown and blonde. Lara's pale and bleary tonight, which can be expected for someone with mid-term work due in five hours. My fellow student shoves a mug my way without preamble.

"I need some coffee, Steve. I'm not sleeping tonight."

"That's not a big surprise." I take the mug. "Black?"

"As usual." I head toward Mister Coffee; she checks out my room. First, vintage industrial-grey walls and dead-white ceiling light panels (nearly impossible to break or knock out). No windows. Then a cot done up in sheets of the same grey, a small metal table, a swivel chair, and, of course, the computer terminal--all bolted in place. Naturally, Lara's squinties come to rest on 7C's own distinctive piece--a human skeleton, suspended from the wall by chains and manacles.

"Damn it, Steve, don't tell me you've already finished Xenobio..."

"It's done, what can I say?" This embellished with a tap on the stacked hard copy on my desk.

"Don't tell me you're *done*, man..."

"Just about.." I trail off, to mean "I'll be up the greater part of the night."

Lara picks up on it, and smiles. "Wish I could say the same." She takes the swivel before pointing at skull boy. "How's Mister Smiley?"

Another of my skeleton's aliases. "Hodgkins says the shackles chafe his wrists too much. Didn't you hear him bitching about it all last night?"

"You know the screaming's too loud...especially from 10E. Steve, I think the MIMFs finally killed her last night."

"It had to happen..."

Bing.

"The coffee's ready," she remarks. Perhaps she thinks I'm somewhat lacking in the ear department. Again, I pay Mister Coffee a visit.

"What I hate, though, are the razorwhips," she adds, offhandedly. Voilà, subject change. "They're a bitch. A MIMF got my back real good with one last night."

"Sorry." She falls silent.

MC Coffee's task finished, I hand her the mug. "WakeUp Extra Strength."

"Thanks."

"Sure." I figure Lara intends to stay for a while; I move my mid-term piles to the

edge of my cot. Lying down, I begin to tear off line-feed strips. 2357 Common Era, and we still use Z-fold paper. Says something about the ever-advancing state of technology on college campuses.

"With any luck," I muse, "the MIMFs will go easy on me come morning." Our nightly prayer...Deliver us from the fury of Admin.

"The bastards *never* go easy on me." Her lips actually draw into a snarl; my words seem to have set her off.

Surprisingly, she manages to control herself, and touches a finger to the coffee's surface.

"Too hot."

"Remember," I tell her, "nine weeks and we're out of here."

"For the summer. Say, what are you doing when you get out?"

Better times lie ahead. "I'll be driving a MegaReaper. Lots of fun...screams and blood everywhere when I run over another student." Evil chuckle...

"And students taste just like chicken. Hell of a lot better than the krill we eat!"

In response, I promptly wad my strips into a ball and score a hit on Lara's arm.

"Ouch!"

"Don't spill the coffee, now."

"I won't. I get to spray the corn with Buggit ten hours a day. Full spacesuit with radiation shielding, and hauling a fifteen-kilo pestipack."

"So it'll build up your muscles."

"Or break my back. The highlights of my workday will be taking cover from solar flares and dodging the Reapers each evening."

"Don't worry, I'll be sure to skip you."

"Hey, no problem. Maybe mutilate me some, so they stick me in KP...as a cook, I mean, not the food. Cooking synthpork for five hundred unpeople an hour. Until my supervisor throws me in a vat for seasoning."

"I'll think I'll pass over the pork for a while." I watch her smile at me. "Still looking forward to it?"

"The summer, or getting my arms chopped off?"

"Whichever you prefer."

"Getting out of here. I'd rather take my chances in the fields than get whipped and beaten every night. I'm only here so I can land a decent job...if I ever get out. Besides, I'll be making credit instead of hearing my parents bitch about spending theirs."

"Your parents are paying your way?"

"Yeah, my grades sucked. What are you, scholarship?"

"Yes." It technically comes under scholarship, anyway. Lara's not bad, but I don't want to tell her that I'm the "token poor boy."

"Coffee should be cool by now," I say.

She looks at me, then takes a sip. "You're right." A pause. "I should get back to work while I've still got time."

"Same here. And good luck." I get up and stretch a bit. My kingdom for a back rub...

"Say," she remarks on the way out. "Where did Bones come from, anyway?"

"I'd like to say he's my former roomate, but he's not. He's actually whoever was in this room last year--I haven't found the name. Rumor says he got really obstinate during a reinforcement session, and the MIMFs killed him. In short, he's an example."

"Huh. Nice." She shuts the door. On that cheerful note, I plod back to the chair and return to my final piece of work, a 20-page evaluation. So far, I'd gotten about halfway through it...

I manage to finish the evaluation, tear the line-feed strips off everything, and place each research paper, report, essay, diagram, graph, spreadsheet, evaluation and explanation in its appropriate folder by 4:42 a.m. Eighteen minutes before the MIMFs are scheduled to appear.

Back in high school in downtown Achod II, the half-nonexistent Admin didn't care if you smoked, or what. East Callisto University is different. If they think it can be used as a weapon, it's verboten. Lighters count. I can get generic cigs come summer, but I'd only get readdicted, so I'll try to resist. I return to the bed and attempt to blank out my mind. Not very hard.

The warning lights flicker at fifteen minutes, ten, five.

Five o'clock. Every room in the dormitory seals itself shut. The dorm's outer airlock slides open, allowing plenty of air to escape. It cycles closed after several moments, and the inner door opens.

The Mnemonic Instruction and Motivation Force--the MIMFs--begins unsealing the door of each room, collecting the students' mid-term work for grading. For a moment I feel sorrow for Shannon, the girl in 10E whom the MIMFs whacked the night before.

The screams begin. Apparently, not everyone has completed their work on time. I recognize the first two shrieks. After that another student cries out, then another, their voices mingling.

I rise to a sitting position and wait as the chorus grows. I hear it every night. But this night is worse than most. I glance nervously at the chair, where my work is stacked.

A click. My door unseals, then slides open. Two MIMFs walk through, in gasmasks and black warsuits. One wields--of course--a razorwhip, the other, a paincane. I can smell my fear.

Behind me, skull boy grins.

Mister Paincane points his electrified toy at the folders. "Let us see how you did this term." To be complimentary, the sound of his voice resembles some creature dwelling thirty meters underwater.

Two doors away, Lara begins to scream.

I bring the stack to Paincane, holding it as he looks through the top folder, drops it on the floor, and examines the next. As he does so, the whip-wielder withdraws a notepad, checking off each item as Paincane calls it out.

"It's all there," the first says eventually. "Pick it up."

I collect the scattered folders. As I stand up--

Paincane's weapon of choice smashes across my knees.

I hear myself scream. White, electrified pain sears up my legs into my heart, my eyes and brain.

I feel my body hit the floor.

When I regain consciousness a few moments later, I hear "You spilled the folders" delivered in an ominous tone. I get a fine view of the MIMF's boots.

Forcing myself to kneel, I begin collecting the folders again. This time, El MIMFo lets me stand. "Put them back on the chair."

After that--"Lie facedown on the floor." I breathe raggedly.

"Remember submission to authority, and your own internal weakness. Now it is time to supply you with the motivation to do at least as well next term."

"Freshman, remove your shirt."

The razorwhip lashes my back for the first time, scattering blood. I groan.

Somehow, I manage to keep count--only twelve lashes, this time. They must be feeling unusually mild tonight, or else the MIMF's arm is tired.

"Get up," says the MIMF of the cane, a while later. I stand. "Bring us the folders once more."

He continues, "you did well in turning in all of your work on time. Your grade report will be delivered to your room upon your return. Enjoy your weekend off."

The MIMFs turn and glide out the door.

Wasteland

by Peter Torigoe

A dog that looks like some sort of large mutt falls to the ground with a red spot in its shoulder. When it lands, the arms and legs fall out in all directions, showing humanoid form. A young man dressed in black jeans and a flannel shirt with the sleeves ripped off walks over, pointing a smoking shotgun at the body. He pulls a small tape recorder from his backpack and begins speaking into it.

"I wonder if radiation destroys the soul. I hope so. I don't like the idea of these beast-men having souls that I'm taking. I hope my soul died a long time ago itself. He lost his humanity, I was enhanced. I'm lucky, my body is stronger and faster, but I don't look any different. This guy might have worked in the pound when it hit, and now he's a pile of mangled fur. I hope his soul left a long time ago." He switches off the recorder and walks away. He doesn't want to see the scavengers which are already scraping at the body.

"Here's another journal entry." He throws a small cassette onto the counter. "Take care of it."

"Why? Who do you think will ever want to listen? Everybody has either lived this themselves or died. We'll all die soon."

"Just take care of it. Maybe not everybody was sterilized in the fires that burned across the earth. Maybe we were the only place that was hit. Because our communications haven't been answered doesn't mean there's nobody to answer them. Maybe our messages never made it out. Who could have predicted this circle of survivable ground? Nobody here knows how it happened, maybe nobody out there knows that it did happen. We can hope."

"You're still a dreamer, Michael. You always did have your head in the clouds. If we hadn't been bombed, you never would have lasted outside of college. You couldn't have survived the way you wanted to."

"What's wrong with writing? There are only two ways we can live on after we die, through our children, and through our art. We only only have one choice left now."

"It's going to be a long and lonely eternity, because nobody else will be alive to read your art."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"Always maybe with you. Are you ever going to give up?"

"No. If I do, there won't be enough maybe left. Take care of the tapes."

"OK, Michael, I will."

"Thanks Richard. I'll be back."

"I hope so. Take care." As the door closed behind Michael, Richard pulled an insulated steel box from under the counter. Inside the box were dozens of similar tapes, each carefully labeled. He labeled the new one, and nestled it into a padded slot in the box. "Keep hoping for all of us."

A shot breaks the afternoon silence, and a lizard twitches on a rock. Another shot, and the lizard will never twitch again. "I wonder if this was ever a man. It's big enough to be, but has no humanoid characteristics at all. Death comes for all things eventually. I bring it for a great many. I wonder who or what will bring it for me. I wonder why I bring it, is it only because I can? That's no reason. I think death is already here and come for these, and left the body behind. This is my greatest poetry, then, cleaning up after death and hoping for life. I stare death in the face everyday. If death is an entity, it knows my face. I wonder if I'll recognize him when he comes for me." A scurrying sound behind Michael causes him to turn around. Because he didn't bother to reload his shotgun after killing the first lizard, he has to draw his machete and hunting knife to deal with this one. He barely has either one out of their black plastic sheaths before the beast is on top of him, clawing and scratching, hissing in rage at the death of its mate. The machete easily cleaves through the hinge of the lizard's mouth, all the way to the bone, and separating the beast's lower jaw from the rest of its skull. It claws furiously, and still tries to bite him, but can do no more than scratch the skin with its fangs. The hunting knife flashes up under the limp jaw, and his nine-inch- long blade pokes neatly up through the skull and into the brain. The entire body goes as limp as the jaw. Michael stands up, and wipes his blades off on the corners of his shirt before placing them back in their sheaths. He picks up his shotgun and reloads it. Then he notices his tape recorder still working.

"I just saw death again, and this time he left a message before moving on."

"Death stopped by again, but I managed to lock the door. He patted me on the shoulder before he left, though. The doctor here said it should recover completely, though. He is a real doctor, at least he says he is. He bandaged me nicely, and seems to know what he's doing around here. It helps my hope to know that people still can find it in themselves to run a hospital. It doesn't help my hope to know how many people would rather die in the street instead of coming here. We can see them from our windows, and it convinces many who came unsure of whether or not they wanted to live one way or the other. Too many are choosing the road I'm not taking. At least not yet. I've passed it so many times in my travels. Someday there will be no other road." He switched off the recorder as he saw the doctor coming in.

"I've done everything I can for you, and you're free to leave anytime you want

to. If you like, you can stay. There is work you can do for us, but you can't stay without helping. I'm sorry, but we can't afford to let people who don't need us stay here."

"Will you give me some medical training if I stay and work?"

"Why, yes, if you like. I may not be much of a teacher, though. I never planned to pass along my skills."

"What did you plan to be? You did have a specialty, correct?"

The doctor smiled because he couldn't cry anymore. "I was an obstetrician."

"I stayed at the hospital for a year. It was one of the most peaceful times I remember since the fires. I hope Richard died peacefully. I'm glad he kept the tapes in this box, which survived the new fires. I knew not all of the remaining people wanted to live, but I never guessed that they would try to take the lives of all the others. I don't know why they wanted to. They did a reasonably thorough job. There is not a single form of shelter left. No buildings, not even the walls or skeletons. Nothing is higher off the ground than a few feet. I can see for miles. Some people are trying to rebuild. They can't, there just aren't enough of them left. I tried to help as many as I could, and the doctor's teachings let me save quite a few. These people fought hard, they wanted to survive. They won. I wonder if they'll win again. They might. They have reasons to fight hard now, because it's either fight hard or lose. I'll help them all I can, but I can't stay long." He switched off the recorder and put the tape in the box, and closed the lid.

"Michael, can you help us?" A small group was struggling with some ropes to raise a large section of steel reinforced concrete.

Michael stood up, and whispered to no one in particular, "I don't know."

"I see civilization rebuilding. In the twilight of the burning city, I see a new city formed. It is a city of small, weak fortresses, but it's a city that is alive. There is even a child, a baby girl. I found her in the arms of her dying mother. She must have been born just before the war. Some people here have even found seeds, and they have planted them. They should sprout soon. If they do, there will be great hope. If they don't, I'll still hope."

He shut the recorder off when he noticed something in the large expanse of black dirt he had been staring at. Something green.

"The people in this little city have grown food now. It's been a hard fight, for the mutants knew about the food. There are few beast mutants left now. These people fight hard. By searching the area, we found enough to make their little fortresses strong. They have even named their town, a name they say I inspired. It is called "Hope." But they have noticed I did not build a fortress. Several have offered to take

me in permanently, and I'm sure they were earnest. But I know I cannot stay. They think it's because I have no hope, but it is because I have too much. This community is strong, but it will not last longer than its current population. It cannot grow. Oh, an occasional straggler or wanderer like myself might find it and decide to stay, two others have already done so, but that is not enough. There has to be more. That is why I must leave.

"We must leave now, to go gather more supplies. There's so much left out there, if we work hard to find it. I always go to protect these people from the mutants, but they can protect themselves now. We're leaving for a while, but we'll return to Hope soon." A group of about two dozen well armed men and women were approaching Michael. He wasn't a real leader, but something of a figure head to them. For some reason, they turned to him first. They didn't really depend on him, but they were beginning to think they did.

"I must leave this place now. I may never make another journal entry. I'm going to do something soon, and go someplace I may never come back from. I'm leaving the living circle, to see what lies beyond. They tell me I can't survive, but I think I can. I've found a military base. I have new weapons, and I have armor. I found a radiation suit, and I added enough armor to the outside of it so that I don't have to worry about any mutants like the ones I've encountered so far. It's so heavy that normal men here can barely move in it. If I hadn't been changed, I wouldn't be able to either. It still feels heavy to me, but I can still run and fight. I've tested that out.

"I also found things which will help this civilization. Transportation. Jeeps and trucks and armored vehicles. There is also plenty of fuel that was protected better than the people who protected it. The fuel supply might outlast these people. I'm taking a small vehicle for myself. I'm leaving these tapes behind, because this is the safest place for them. I hope someday to return and give the tapes to some children from a big city, soft, innocent children who don't have to fight for their lives. I'm giving the box to Hope, and they will take care of it. I must leave them now, before they are completely dependent on my words. Already they listen more than they should. I pray that Hope survives." Michael shut off the recorder, and put the tapes in the box. He began to walk towards the village for what the watching people all knew might be the last time.

"Pay attention, students, and observe this place carefully. It is the newest temple, and also the newest religion..."

"Excuse me, Professor, but isn't it a little...odd to describe something that's obsolete as new?" Snickers ran through the students.

"To us, religion is obsolete, but to these people, it was vitally important. I per-

sonally believe religion is not dead, but only dormant. When humanity is in dire need of hope again, I believe we shall return to religion. Look at the name of this settlement, it is obvious that these people had hope. If the religion helped them, good for it."

"But it didn't do the people much good, did it?" More snickers and giggles.

"You tell me." The professor walked over to a box set on a concrete altar, and picked up a small tape recorder. "A small group of people was struggling for survival in an area of the country ravaged by the nuclear war. They found hope in one man, and he became a god in their eyes. Unfortunately, only one,who was one of the last children born, survived long enough to be found in the great searches. She was taught the legends connected with messiah figures, that he was more than human. She couldn't give us much reliable information about him at all. But they survived in an environment so alien to our own, that if you even stepped outside briefly now, you couldn't survive long. A week or two at most."

"What's the absolute longest time a person could survive in those conditions? Is there any chance there are still original survivors? We've searched relatively little of the huge area that was contaminated by the blast."

"Well, that's definitely more of a question for a biologist than an anthropologist, but I seriously doubt it. The 'Thirty Second War' happened over sixty years ago. I doubt any one could survive that long, even if they happened to find protection. Our suits won't protect us completely for more than a few days, and these are a great improvement over any suits that existed back then. There is no way a human being could have survived sixty years in this wasteland."

"Do you really think religion did anything for these people? Couldn't they have survived as long as they did without it?"

A new voice came through the speakers built into their suits, not over the radio bands they used for communication, but from the outside. It was a raspy voice, the voice of a very old man, but there was amazing strength in it. "That's what I tried to tell them." All eyes turned to a figure coming in out of the desert, a figure dressed in what looked like armor, blackened after long years of use. The figure approached, and the students and professor stared in shock and amazement. "They didn't need me to survive, only their own hope."

The Ballad of Bobo Fett

by Scott Koon

Go back, back to the long back time
When ognals fluttered and weeznels whined
And orange ongypons groped in the grime
Near the river Gobo, at the foot of Mount Otet,
In this land lived the people of Fett.

The fine Fett folk filled their fulsome lives with glee.
They ate fine fruit from the laboobada tree.
They made sloog bark into slookbark jellies,
And they slept all together with their heads on their bellies.
They all worked together in the obdunk field.
They all worked hard, and they all shared the yield.
The everyday party was the bring what you bring.
And so each had a feast, but none paid a thing.
Yes, the fine Fett folk filled their fulsome lives with glee.
Every Fett was happy, and every fettling free.

Every Fett, that is, but one.
That one Fett, a fellow named Bobo,
Had an unfettish thought on the bank of the Gobo.
His muscles were tired from hauling in the nets,
Nets full of fishes to feed all the Fetts.
His brain was all tense, so his thoughts went awry.
He thought to himself "How stupid am I!
To feed all the Fetts my fine finny fish,
And get in return some less succulent dish!
And nightly some Fett puts his head on my belly,
Who's dumb as a fish, and equally smelly!
And look at these Fetts - they smile all the time!
How stupid that is without reason or rhyme!
We smile at each other, we smile at the sun,
We smile at the trees, we smile at no one,
We smile at the rocks, we smile at the lard,
Why should we smile when we all work so hard!
Only I know this, so damn all the rest!
Why should I work, when I am the best!"

That night he went out while the other Fetts slept.
Out past the village to the river he crept.
He caught all the fish, every last last one,
And pickled them all, ton after ton.
The very next morning, the Fetts thought it strange,
To see a new Bobo and how he had changed.
He gathered them all by the laboobada tree
He stood on a box and said "Listen to me!
I know all you Fetts are set in your ways,
But you have a new law-giver these days.
Now night after night, day after day,
You'll listen to me and do what I say.
If you do not, you'd better run quick!
I'll take what I want and beat with a stick!
Last night I caught all the fish, every last one,
And pickled them all, ton after ton.
I claim all these fish, for they are my right,
And no one will put his head on my belly at night.
You dare not defy me, for you are all weak!
How dare you smile, all stupid and meek?"

And all the Fetts smiled, quite happy at this.
No Fett was wronged, no thing was amiss.
The farmer Fett smiled as he caught Bobo's arm.
The Butcher Fett smiled as he caused Bobo harm.
They ripped out his pancreas, they ripped out his spleen.
All Fetts were smiling, and no Fett was mean.
He was all plump and juicy, this would-be king.
So each had a feast, though none brought a thing.

That was long ago in the Fett past.
No blame can there be, so don't be aghast.
Bobo is gone and he's forgotten.
All Fetts are happy, and no Fett is rotten.
They're happy and free to this very day.
And the next Bobo to come will be a Bobo to slay.

Homecoming

by Sean McDowell

After the war, driving west on Route 9, things had seemed as I remembered it. John's Diner had been a little worse for wear, and aside from the occasional crater, I was home. But getting off Route 9, I realised that massive reconstruction was being finished. The road was completely blocked by orange cones. I asked a worker what was going on, and the best he could do was say,"Gee, I dunno, but we'll be done soon. Come back in a couple of hours."

I went back to John's. He didn't know what was happening. "They've been at it since the first shell struck the courthouse. They were finishing up today though," he said. After an uneventful meal of NutriSups and a full ration of SynthiVodka (I was upset), conversation started to interest me.

"Would you believe that that one fellar from the North End went in one night and had to call a cab to get out? What a moron!", one local said to the group.

"It's a damn shame, poor fella even had a map," another answered.

"Why did he get lost?" was my feeble response.

"Well, he just isn't one of us, huh?" His smile was of incredible menace. Everyone laughed and I edged towards the door. Reaching the handle, I was called back. "You forgot your bill," John said. Everyone laughed, and went back to talking.

"You seem like a nice fellow, just be careful out there." John said.

I was soon back on Route 9 and the blockades were gone. I was faced with the world of Suburbia. Pink Flamingos on every lawn! Had I been away this long? The welcome mats up and down the streets with cheery children playing in the street. How I wished I had a tactical nuclear missile to end my misery and this hell! All the road signs were exchanged for flowery icons around a strange suburban name, such as "Glendale Terrace." I kept driving, but it was no use, all the roads curved erratically. I finally called in reinforcements.

I can hear the jets as they approach with SubStomp missiles poised. Why does this always happen to me?

Mr. Cooper's Other Profession

by Chris Watkins

Most rain storms have a kind of peace to them. A certain calm in the rhythmic drum-beat of drops and the low bass line of distant thunder. This is nothing new. Without a doubt, the very first caveman to step from his evolutionary shell must have thought what fantastic musical achievements the songs of the weather could be if only Casey Casem were alive to count them down on the radio (which would also have to be invented) every weekend.

The storm beating its base drum over Guy Cooper's rain-numbed cranium, however, was doing so with all the rhythm and finesse of an elephant farting. Not that the water-logged thirty-year-old would have noticed even if the clouds were furiously blaring out Ravel's "Bolero." Guy was too busy studying something that had been troubling the resident of his previously-mentioned dome since 5:00 that afternoon.

Specifically, Guy's mind had occupied itself with trying to decipher the scribbled note Guy had found lying on his shabby wooden desk at work. As he made his way home to his apartment through the rain, he studied the document religiously.

With a peculiar lurch-step-trip, Guy's brain came to that singularly unique sort of revelation that can only result in such a lurch-step-trip: the scribbled note on yellow company stationary was a memo sadly informing him that sadly due to the recent sad economic recession, the company would sadly not be able to give Guy his sad yearly bonus check. "Sorry!" jumped up and down at Guy from the bottom of the paper, sticking out its exclamation point at him and making rude noises with its arm-pits.

No annual bonus meant no summer trip to the Grand Canyon. No summer trip meant Guy might as well stay at work for that week and save the vacation time for some other opportunity. Guy fumed.

And as he foamed and cursed, Guy marched blindly past his apartment building and on into the roaring downpour. By the time Guy realized that he had missed his building, he had stomped two blocks down from his home and was standing ankle deep in a puddle of suspiciously yellow shaded rain water. Quickly regaining his sense of self, Guy whipped his head around, trying to sight the muggers and gangers who waited for people like himself to do something like he had, and thus had to have been lurking somewhere nearby, ready to pounce. He didn't see a soul.

What he did see was a new street. Not a road laboriously planted into the city over the course of several years by lethargic, eternally omni-present, butt-crack brandishing city workmen. No, this street was entirely and absolutely new. New like a

fuzzy baby chick.

This wasn't to say that the road bore no signs of city-life. On the contrary; the sidewalks were cracked and littered with refuse. There were tall, rotting buildings on each side of the pavement and the road itself wore numerous battle scars and pot-holes. What made the street so new was the fact that Guy had never, in his eighteen years of living just two blocks away, even heard of Empusae Boulevard — that being the name of the street as revealed by a nearby street sign.

At the end of the freshly-hatched boulevard stood an incredibly shiny silver sky-scraper. Printed in huge letters across the front of the building was the name "Temp-Tech." Hovering above that, even larger and more profound, was a glowing and pulsing yellow eight lying on its side. It took Guy a minute to realize that this character was an infinity symbol.

The shimmering glass doors of the building had a drawing force. Guy felt pulled toward the yellow light and, it not being in Guy's nature to resist divine intervention, he walked toward it. Before he realized what he was doing, he had opened the doors (which made a 'swooshing,' vacuum-releasing sound like the doors on old Star Trek episodes) and stumbled inside.

If the outside of the building was big, then the inside was something way beyond enormous and only a smidge less than ever-present. Guy's senses would have reeled in awe at the sheer magnitude of the setting, if his mind wasn't still numbed by recent events. As it was, his mind only staggered a bit and fell off its chair when it tried to sit down.

As Guy looked around, he became aware of a pair of eyes sending telekinetic signals that said "hey you," to the back of his head. He turned. Someone (a receptionist perhaps) stood scant feet from Guy, breathing forth an odor that smelled vaguely of gasoline and formaldehyde and that constantly threatened the defenses of Guy's turning stomach.

"This way, if you please, Mr. Pooper," chirped the man/woman (Guy couldn't tell exactly what this being of indiscriminate gender was, other than confusing).

"Cooper," corrected Guy in a mumbling, I-don't-know-what-the-hell-is-going-on-and-would-somebody-please-bash-my-face-in-with-a-large-piece-of-metal-and-make-it-better sort of tone.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the person, "how very droll and cliché of me."

A small bubble of saliva poked its way out of the corner of Guy's mouth to see if it could make sense of what was going on. Guy shoved it back in with his finger and tried in vain to catch up with the person who had begun walking toward the nearest hallway.

"Umm... can you maybe, possibly tell me just what, umm, what's going on?," Guy stammered.

"Nope," replied the person with a barely perceptable grin, "sorry Mr. Stupor, but that would be against company policy."

Guy decided not to correct him/her/it this time; he had been called worse. As long as it didn't call him something like "shit-whiffle" or "pulsating yeast infection," a simple error was tolerable. You had to learn to roll with the punches in life.

"Okay Mr. Yeastinfection," said the thing, "this is your stop." They had halted in front of an ordinary, sterile-looking doorway. The empty silvery room inside was equally sterile-looking.

Just as Guy had begun to turn toward his guide (he had just realized that he had called him "Mr. Yeastinfection"), the thing shoved him forcefully into the room.

Guy's right shoe was quickly lost in the bottom of the mud puddle his foot had abruptly landed in. His toes curled back in confusion and surprise. His body followed suit, and as he panned his vision to take in his surroundings, the unique bodily twist left him looking sort of like a maimed and forlorn pretzel who had to beg for charity on the street corner because the other pretzels thought he was too deformed to share residency with them.

He was standing on a muddy dirt road in the middle of the night, amidst a thick layer of distinctly British fog (British fog has a certain pretentiousness and sense of self-history that lends it more weight than most other fogs around the world; a direct result of being featured in the opening lines of more works of fiction than the author would care to mention, even if he knew).

At the end of the road, belching out long, lightning-mangled shadows, crouched a bleak, broad, Victorian house. It was in perfect condition, showing no signs of age. Two rows of limp Azaleas bent and whimpered under the driving rain along the sides of the tiny mud path that led from the road to the front of the house.

In a moment of peculiarly slowed time, Guy heard a thunder-like roar rip out of the air. His head followed the sound lazily down to his right leg, where a wide hole spontaneously blew open in the middle of his calf. As the taffy-moment stretched even longer, Guy found himself wafting to the ground, with no real idea as to why.

Time lurched and started forward again at its regular pace. Guy was screaming. The blood oozing out of his leg ran into muddy puddles and created works of pop art that even Andy Warhol would have been hard pressed to beat. As his eyes rolled back into his head and Guy fell unconscious, he thought that he saw the shape of a big fuzzy goat in one of the puddles. Guy smiled. He liked goats.

When he came to, he felt a pair of arms around his waist, holding him up. A moment later, he was dumped onto a distinctly hard and uncomfortable sofa. There was a long, thin stick leaning against the end of the sofa; possibly a rifle. A man whose face he couldn't quite make out was standing over him and talking to someone on the other side of the room. Guy strained to see who he was conversing with.

Suddenly his vision popped back into focus, not unlike a dislocated shoulder being wrenched back into place. He saw a blonde girl in her late teens or early twenties, wearing a stuffy pink dress that seemed somehow out of place to Guy's knowledge. When he glanced around the room, however, he realized that he was the one not in context — a human comma splice.

A pain bolted up Guy's leg, driving a pick-up with spiked snow tires and laughing the whole way. Guy winced. The indistinct man looked down at him and frowned.

"Please try to relax, sir." He looked vaguely nervous. "I'm just going to get the doctor now. No need to worry, of course. Of course?"

Guy responded by throwing up all over a nearby Persian rug. The young lady sighed and left the room. The man glanced briefly in her direction and then turned to the other doorway. "My sister will care for you until I return, sir. No need to cause an uproar. A simple mistake, and all..." He stammered and hastened his pace out of the room and out of the house.

When his sister came back, she had a large pan of water and several old rags. She kneeled on the rug in front of Guy and began cleaning up his mess. Guy's features twisted into a warped expression of complete bewilderment.

"Um," he murmured, "hello. . . ?"

The girl looked up at him. Her countenance hadn't changed from the first time Guy had seen her. Her face was entirely naked, wearing no expression, concerned, pleased, angry, sultry, or otherwise. Without speaking, she turned back to her work. Guy shrugged and turned his attention to the ceiling.

When prolonged study of the high plastered architecture brought him no revelations, Guy returned to his surroundings. Apparently a fair amount of time had passed, as the girl was now sitting in a large, stuffy-looking chair on the other side of the room. She had a broad pad of drawing paper in her lap and was intently scratching designs across it with a set of crude pencils. Guy watched her for several minutes before he spoke.

"Hi, I'm Guy," he offered. She didn't seem to hear him. There was a strange yet pleasant smile pulling at the corners of her lips. A clock rung out the time somewhere else in the house, and it took the echoes quite a bit of effort to crawl through the infinite hallways before they could find Guy's ears. When the twelfth and final chime rang out, the girl leapt to her feet. Her expression of contentment had changed into one of concern and sudden realization. Then she focused her view on the front door. Her eyes were squeezed black in the middle of an angry eyelid sandwich. She huffed and collapsed back into her chair. Slowly, after turning to the window several times, her gaze settled upon Guy's bloody leg. Guy felt somehow guilty.

"Um. . .I'm terribly sorry for the inconvenience Miss. . .I didn't mean to get shot. I really didn't." He chuckled and tried to lighten her attitude. "Hell, I don't even know

how I got here."

The girl scowled at him and sent an especially icy bullet out of her glare when he mentioned the Devil's favorite vacation spot.

"So you like to draw?" Guy tried again. "Are you any good?" There was no response. "Well. . .um. . .do you like goats?" Guy stammered and mumbled a bit longer before finally giving up altogether. He sighed and rolled his head back toward the ceiling. Slowly he drifted into a light, airy sleep.

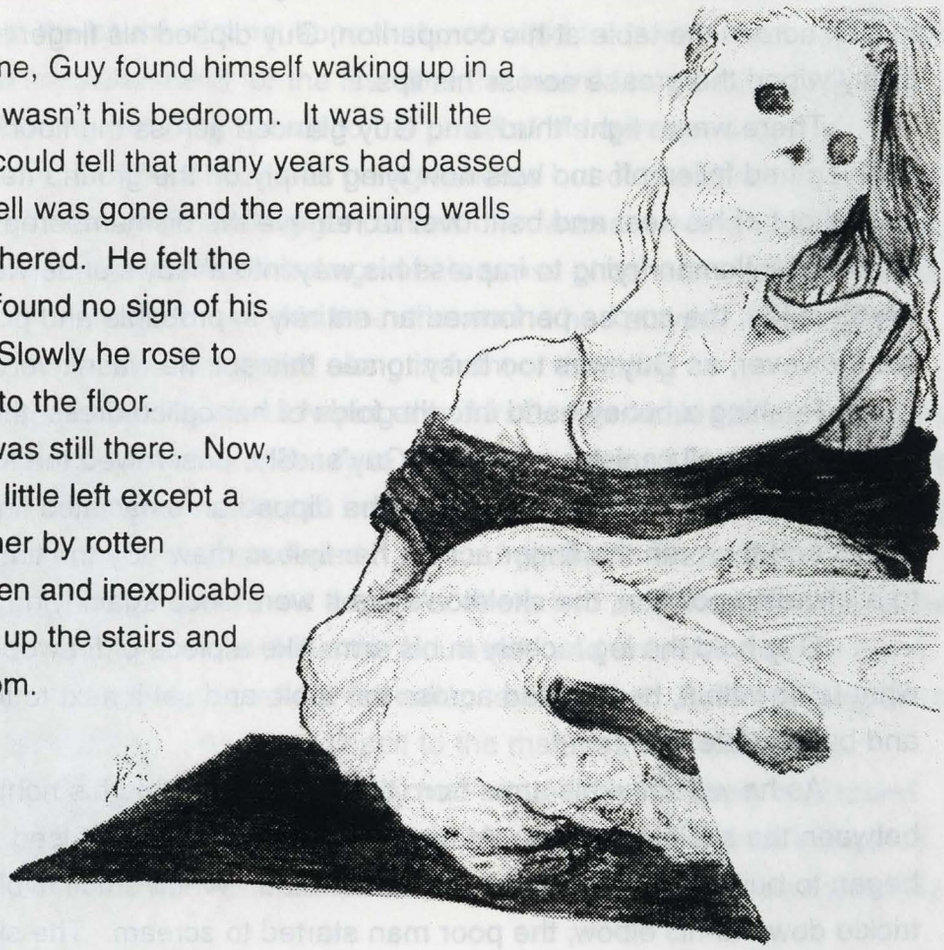
This time when he woke up, he could tell immediately what was different about his surroundings. A putrid odor assaulted his nose, beating down on it with rotten floorboards and decomposing garbage. Hefty barrages of rain pelted his still closed eyelids. He sat up and carefully felt his leg. There was no trace of a wound.

Guy stood up and promptly slammed his head into a broken ceiling beam. He looked around. It was the same house, but now it was old and battered. It had the unique look and smell of a house that had been gutted by fire. On the opposite side of the room there now stood a small oak table set for tea. The china was broken and charred, but still in surprisingly usable shape. Guy's attention was then drawn to the floor.

Lying there, still in her stuffy pink dress (now made partially black by soot) was the young woman. Her eyes were closed and the edges of her lips were drawn slightly downward. There were soot marks on her face, but she wasn't burnt. Guy kneeled beside her and realized that she wasn't breathing. As he passed his hand over her side, he found a small sliver of brown peeking out from a waist pocket. He reached in and pulled out a folded piece of rigid paper. There was a note on it, written in an eloquent hand. It said:

> "My Edna will be returning from her duties in the city late this Friday night. Please, if you would join us for a late tea at a minute or so before the hour of twelve, we would be grateful. And bring your drawings, of course; we are in quite an excitement to see them."

At the bottom was an indecipherable signature. Guy suddenly felt very guilty. He realized now why the girl had seemed so distraught when the clock had struck twelve. Just as his mind teetered dangerously on the verge of further revelations, a water-soaked ceiling beam flew down from the heavens and knocked some sense out of him.



For a third time, Guy found himself waking up in a place that definitely wasn't his bedroom. It was still the house, but now he could tell that many years had passed — the offensive smell was gone and the remaining walls were grey and weathered. He felt the top of his head but found no sign of his recent (?) mishap. Slowly he rose to his feet and looked to the floor.

The corpse was still there. Now, however, there was little left except a skeleton held together by rotten clothes. On a sudden and inexplicable impulse, Guy raced up the stairs and sought out a bedroom.

He found the brother's first. It was filled with minor hunting trophies and several now ancient photographs. The photographs contained the trapped images of several different servants and hunting guides, looking grim and unhappy beside the smiling brother and his various kills. Guy threw open a wardrobe and exchanged his muddy jacket and polo shirt for a ruffled white shirt (actually more of a sickly yellow now, due to years of weather and insect problems) and a dark vest of undefinable hue.

He found the sister's room next, which was significantly smaller but no less elaborately decorated. From the wardrobe he drew the only dress that remained in wearable condition - a blue calico job that was, like the pink dress, very Victorian.

He returned to the parlor and hastily forced the girl's corpse into the dress. Rain ran down his face from wide holes in the roof above. He sat her down at one end of the tea table (which was still standing, believe it or not) and found his place at the other. She sat there staring at him, her head tilted slightly to the right and a permanent grin fused onto her skeletal face.

Guy tried to smile back at his particularly unusual companion but found that the sheer oddity of the whole situation prevented him from doing so. As a matter of fact, the oddity began to do a soft-shoe on the back of Guy's throat to the tune of an early Mel Torme song, leaving his throat dry and barren. He didn't have anything to drink, but he remembered suddenly that he *did* have a small canister of lip balm. Trying not

to look across the table at his companion, Guy dipped his finger into the canister and vainly wiped the grease across his lips.

There was a light "thud" and Guy glanced across the floor to see that the girl's right leg had fallen off and was now lying limply on the ground next to her chair. Guy leaped out of his seat and bent over to retrieve the dismembered member, like a sex-starved gentleman trying to impress his way into a lady's underwear. As he gingerly lifted the leg, the corpse performed an entirely improbable and potentially frightening act (however, as Guy was too busy to see this act, he wasn't very frightened).

Pushing a boney hand into the folds of her calico dress, the corpse found and withdrew a small canister not unlike Guy's. She unscrewed the top to reveal a dusty chunk of toothless human jawbone. She dipped an emaciated finger into one of the ridges and then ran the finger across her lipless maw. By the time Guy had returned to a standing position, the skeleton's arms were once again lying daintily in her lap.

Guy held the leg loosely in his arms like a piece of firewood. Not exactly sure what to do with it, he reached across the table and set it next to the corpse's bread and butter plate.

As he withdrew his arms from the limb, Guy found his right hand suddenly between the skeleton's jaws. At first, he was only a bit confused. As the pressure began to build, however, Guy became alarmed. When small rivulets of blood began to trickle down to his elbow, the poor man started to scream. The skeleton's teeth shattered abruptly, and it continued to press down on Guy's wrist with its now ragged and empty jawbones. Unable to accept what was going on any longer, Guy's brain went to the kitchen, found a frying pan, and bashed itself in the head. Guy lost consciousness.

This time when he came to, everything was black. His butt felt cold and wet, and Guy realized that he was sitting in a shallow puddle of water (he hoped). Strange musical sounds echoed in the distance. As he stood, Guy became aware of a presence immediately behind him.

Looming over Guy, with the sort of menace and terror-evoking qualities that only a giant animated skeletal mutant corpse can possess, was a giant animated skeletal mutant corpse. Guy shrieked. The skeleton hissed. Somewhere in the endless distance, Mel Torme sang in scat.

Frantic, Guy tried to plant his fist into the middle of the corpse's massive skull. The monster, obviously fed up with the tradition of blindly accepting a blow, decided to respond by opening its wide maw and clamping down on Guy's hand.

Guy had a horrible feeling of deja vu as blood began to spurt wildly from his radial artery. As the pressure increased, the massive teeth of the skeleton's elongated lower jaw shattered. Those of the upper jaw quickly followed. Guy began to perform a ghastly version of the infamous "pee-pee dance."

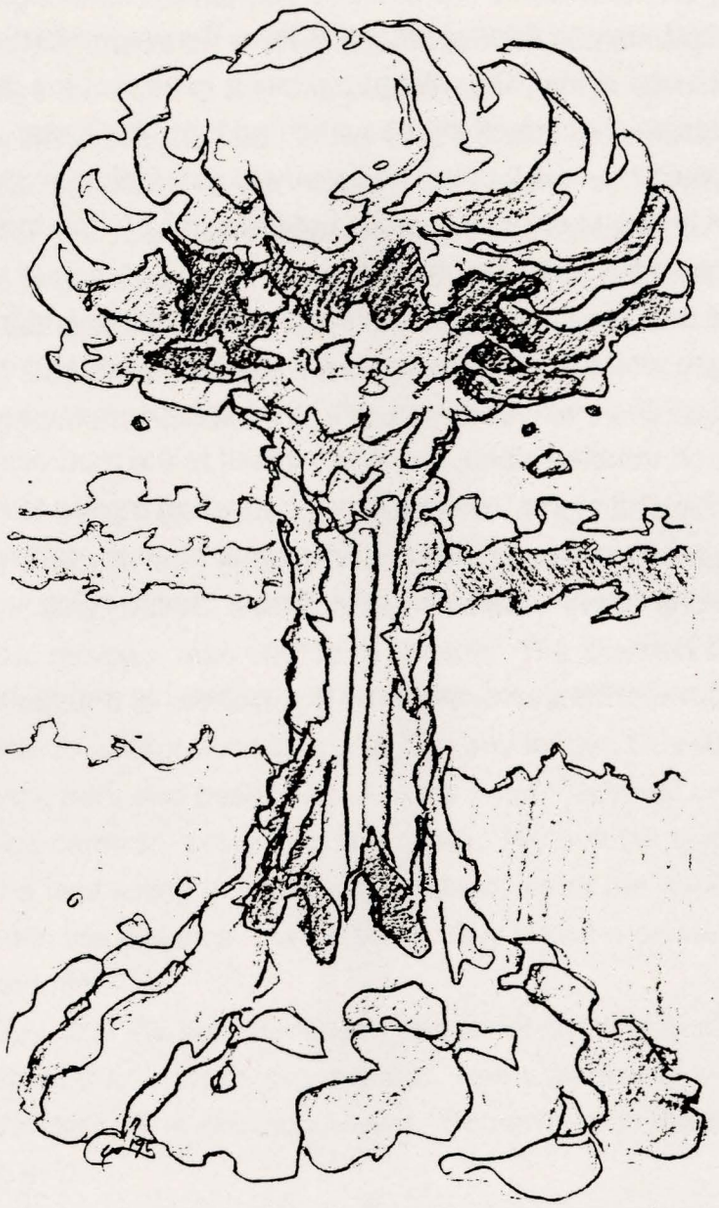
In a sudden shower of blood and bone fragments, Guy's right hand came off.

He staggered backward limply from the massive animated corpse, staring in complete shock at the chunk of wrist bone that protruded from his bloody stump of an arm. As Guy lost consciousness for the last time, he heard Mel in the background, "ba-ba-ba" and "doo-be-doo"-ing in time to the pulse of his own spurting fluids.

The next thing he knew, Guy was being ushered out of the silver room inside the silver building by the odd-smelling genderless man/woman. He shook his head, trying desperately to clear out the wreckage of his sense of coherent reality. He felt for his right hand, only to discover that this time, the wound had stayed. Rubbing his smooth, scarred stump, Guy staggered along in front of the thing.

It was saying something about hoping that Mr. Cooter would have a nice vacation and would return refreshed and ready to get back to work. It mentioned also that the annual bonus check would sadly not be coming in the mail this year. Have a nice day! Guy mumbled a somewhat confused "I quit. . .I guess" in response.

And then Guy was propelled out the silver doors and back into the rainy street. Not daring to look back, he hurried down the boulevard and onto the road he knew. He continued on to his apartment, where he collapsed into bed. Before drifting off into a twisted and troubled sleep, Guy tied himself to the mattress with his sheets.

By the end of the following month, Guy had moved to rural Sicily and found work as a goat-herder. It was an unusual and archaic profession, but he enjoyed it, and was never heard complaining about poor quality office supplies or an especially short lunch hour.

And when the goats opted not to give him his annual bonus check, he didn't really mind.